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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ABUJA 000524

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR AF/W, USAID/W FOR AFR/AA, CONSTANCE NEWMAN,
AFR/WA, MICHAEL KARBELING, GH/AA, ANN PETERSON, GH/CH
SURVIVAL, HOPE SUKIN, OES/IHA

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: NIGERIA: STATUS OF POLIO ERADICATION
INITIATIVE (PEI)

REF: ABUJA 00433

SUMMARY

1. This cable provides an update on the current situation related to polio eradication in Nigeria, including actions in process and to be undertaken over the next two-week period. Kano State remains the lone hold-out since the last cable, with Zamfara State hosting the well attended and well publicized National Flag-off Ceremony on Monday, 22 March 2004, presided over by President Obasanjo. Even with the success of the Flag-off, however, there remain significant pockets of doubt and confusion among all levels of the population, including the very well educated, professional levels. All relevant donor Agency personnel are in the field this week for monitoring of the second round of national immunization days (NIDs), which concludes today, Thursday, 25 March.

CURRENT ACTIVITIES

2. The Zamfara State Flag-off ceremony was a well-reported success, receiving largely favorable, positive treatment in the media. President Obasanjo delivered the keynote address and pledged to be personally involved in the eradication campaign to ensure complete success. During the ceremonies, the Sultan of Sokoto urged all Muslims to bring their children to be immunized. In addition to the President, the Minister of Health and the Sultan, an impressive list of dignitaries from the north and elsewhere, including donor Agency Heads, were on hand for the flag-off.

3. In spite of the success of the Flag-off, a weekly newspaper, "The Path," from Sokoto said in their March 24 issue that there remains lingering resistance to the polio vaccine in Zamfara state. Reporting from Gusau, the capital city of Zamfara, the Path's reporter said that only 3 out of 70 parents questioned said they would immunize their children. The remainder of the article listed positive statements from the Sultan of Sokoto, various emirs, and provided good coverage of the governor's and other officials' children being immunized. It is clear that it will take some time to reorient average people on this issue.

4. The 8 northern Governors met with the Kano Governor on Friday, 19 March 2004. A usually reliable source of information in Kano reports that no change was effected on the Kano State position as a result of that meeting. The Governor is still insisting that he be allowed to purchase his own vaccines for his state. Any information we receive that differs from this will be reported in a later cable.

5. Also reported to us was a meeting of the Ulamas in Kano on 22 March, with the same outcome - a firm resolve that Kano purchase their own oral polio vaccine (OPV) henceforth.

6. We expect to obtain a copy next week of the videotape that was made of the meeting held in Kano and hosted by the Governor of Kano, wherein the decision was taken to reject the OPV supplied by the National Program on Immunization in favor of supplying their own. The meeting was conducted in Hausa language and, when received, we will have it interpreted in hopes it will shed light on a rationale for the persistent rejection.

7. Pending reports from the field evaluating the second round of NIDs, it is not yet known whether the Bauchi State Governor carried out his promise to support the round with health personnel as vaccinators, including the payment of their stipends. Details will be in subsequent cable.

8. A Kaduna-based Human Rights organization is considering bringing legal action against the Supreme Council for Sharia over their opposition to the OPV. The organization considers this to be a violation of the child's rights to immunization and protection from

the crippling disease of polio.

¶9. It is being reported in the local press that all of the former Heads of State from the North assured the U.N. Special Representative, Prof. Gambari, during his recent trip to Nigeria that they are in favor of polio immunization. These statements imply favorable opportunities for advocacy actions from any or all of them to the Kano Governor.

¶10. Also noted, based upon numerous interactions with groups such as the Federation of Muslim Women's Organizations in Nigeria (FOMWON), is a lack of clear and accurate information on basic medical issues related to immunizations, suggesting immediate possibilities for all donor agencies to collaborate on creating and making widely available informational materials.

¶11. USAID took part, together with WHO, UNICEF and the Federal Government of Nigeria in a UNICEF-sponsored meeting on 19 March, 2004, to sensitize high-level health professionals from across the country. The presentations generated much discussion and provided an opportunity to clear up misconceptions and misunderstandings. All states were represented in the audience, including Kano State, and good progress was made toward mutual understanding. A full report of the meeting is not yet available from UNICEF.

----- DONOR COMMITMENT -----

¶12. Donors will reconvene their coordination meetings the week following the return of all agency personnel from their field monitoring duties. The next meeting will be a review of the first two NIDs rounds of this year and a re-strategizing for the remainder of the year.

¶13. There is still no new date set for an Interagency Coordinating Committee (ICC) meeting, but there is an expectation that it may happen in the coming week.

¶14. The Core Technical Group continues to meet a minimum of once weekly, except during the implementation of NIDs, at which time the participants are in the field monitoring.

¶15. Carl Hassleblad, a CDC-funded immunization expert working with WHO, is scheduled to arrive in Nigeria on 31 March and will be based in Kano State. Mr. Hassleblad is a former BASICS consultant who worked in Kano State during his two-year tenure here in 2001 and ¶2002. Mr. Hassleblad's assignment is scheduled to last through December 2004.

----- NEXT STEPS -----

¶16. The second round of NIDs began on 22 March and ends on 25 March, with all states except Kano participating fully. Assessments of the round nationwide will begin on Monday 29 March with all partners participating. Planning will begin at once for subsequent rounds of State National Immunization Days (sNIDs), mop-ups and ongoing social mobilization and training activities.

¶17. The USG-supported community ownership process in Kano State, Participatory Learning and Action Committee for Ownership (PLACO), is on track for all phases, including routine immunization - except OPV. Project head will visit Kano on Wednesday, 31 March to ascertain the status of thinking among government officials in the state. He will then report his findings to the USAID Mission on Friday, 2 April 2004.

----- CONCLUSION -----

¶18. Mission will conduct information gathering activities over the coming week following the implementation exercise, and continue to work with our donor partners toward the goal of interruption of wild poliovirus transmission by end of 2004.

¶19. Mission reiterates our emphasis on the necessity of strengthening the routine immunization system in this country, and particularly in Kano State, to ensure sustained polio eradication and protection against the other killer childhood diseases. The effort will require significant funding and ongoing, intensive collaboration between USAID, WHO, UNICEF and the GON.

¶20. Post will continue to provide regular reports on progress in the effort to eradicate polio in Nigeria.

ROBERTS